

ADDRESSING THE SAFETY ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Since the construction industry reopened in May, any likely radical reforms of moving the Safe Pass training programme to an online 'test' are not in the best interests of the industry, claims safety consultant Declan Gibney. He says that efforts need to be redoubled to raise safety standards and awareness in saving lives and preventing injuries.

In the world of work, we talk about developing safety cultures and changing safety behaviour these days, and rightly so.

We also have a reasonable and understandable expectation that we will see progress with time, such as improvements in workplace safety rather than it disimproving over the years.

It appears then that there is surprisingly little interest in the facts that currently contradict this expectation. Firstly, 16 people lost their lives in construction site accidents last year, THREE TIMES the number killed in 2018. To add to this concern, the construction sector was closed for almost two months in 2020 due to the pandemic, so that was a 10-month year, making the figures even more concerning.

If you happen to think that last year was an exception, let me remind you that six people have lost their lives in the construction industry in 2021 to date, and with most sites closed from January to late April this year, the figure is still more than the total for 2018.

Secondly, almost half (7 of 16) the



number of people killed in construction accidents in Ireland in 2020 were self-employed. Thirdly, there is a growing call from certain quarters for Safe Pass training to be scrapped in its current format and provided as an online 'test' with a

simple renewal process, similar to the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) and the driving licence.

SAFE PASS IS NOT A TEST
In reality, Safe Pass training is a well-



There is a growing call from certain quarters for the Safe Pass training programme to be scrapped in its current format and provided as an online 'test' with a simple renewal process.

established and highly effective route for the self-employed and the employees in the SME sector – exactly the risk profile that needs to work hard on developing a genuine safety culture.

Safe Pass training has its weaknesses and there is arguably too much paperwork and too much content for course participants to take in over one day. However, before we scrap the training in its current format, it is well worth to take a step back and give it some consideration.

Safe Pass is a blended awareness programme that, over time, raises awareness of what causes death, ill-health, and life-changing injuries. This in turn changes habits, behaviour and culture. A Safe Pass test will never replicate this, and it is not the answer.

In actual fact, for many people Safe Pass training, provides them with the opportunity to stop and think about their health and safety standards and behaviour.

On the other hand, engaging with and listening to stakeholders, such as the experienced Safe Pass Tutors, may create an opportunity for a radical reform of Safe Pass that ensures that it is fit for purpose for the next 20 years!

SAFE PASS TRAINING PROGRAMME

The SOLAS Safe Pass Health and Safety Awareness Training Programme was first developed and introduced in 2002 following an initiative by the Construction Industry Training Committee (CITC).

This initiative was incorporated into the Construction Safety Partnership Plan, launched by Tom Kitt TD, the then Minister for Labour, Trade and Consumer Affairs.

Detailed consultation took place between FAS (now SOLAS) and Expert Working Groups representing the social partners with the support of the CITC.

The purpose of the SOLAS Safe Pass Training Programme is to ensure, over the course of time, that all construction site and local authority personnel, will have a basic knowledge of health and safety, and be able to work on site without being a risk to themselves or others who may be affected by their acts or omissions.

The one-day Safe Pass training, which is delivered in a classroom environment, is valid for a four-year period. Subjects covered range from working at heights to legislation and include excavations, confined spaces, accident reporting and behaviour-based safety.

Training is delivered in a blended style that incorporates exercises, case studies and discussions based on experience. There is usually a mix of ages and experience in the group, which adds greatly to the learning experience.

For more information visit www.solas.ie/construction-lp/safe-pass/

*In recent weeks SOLAS has published a request for tender for the provision of Safe Pass renewals through a test centre rather than the current course format.





The Elephant in the Room is that at the very time we need to engage with the self-employed and SMEs, we face the real risk of scrapping an established route of engaging with this cohort of the sector.

CHANGES TO CONSIDER

Here are some simple but very effective changes to consider:

- **Redefine the profile of those who require Safe Pass training:** Create a simple system that recognises continuous professional development through engagement with site inductions, toolbox talks etc. If we can create loyalty cards for coffee shops, we can create a system of recognising these activities and allowing automatic renewal of Safe Pass cards every four years for certain workers.
- **Registration forms completed in advance of training with photograph provided by participants:** This would shorten the course by 30 minutes and allow those with reading and writing concerns to complete the paperwork with any necessary assistance.
- **Make more content relating to 'Be Smart':** The Health and Safety Authority's DIY safety statement and risk assessment website.
- Introduce a significant section on Mental Health: Males aged 18-65 are the dominant cohort completing Safe Pass training and the most vulnerable

when it comes to suffering mental ill-health.

- **Less focus on the 'big site' environment:** The high-risk environment is the small site.
- **Restructure the course content:** This could include several core content modules and tutor selected additions depending on the group and relevance.
- **Include a defined section on 'updates':** This could look at what is new over the past four years, and could include legislation, Approved Codes of Practice, decided court cases and statistics for example.

CERTAIN CHANGES NEEDED

The Elephant in the Room is that at the very time we need to engage with the self-employed and SMEs, we face the real risk of scrapping an established route of engaging with this cohort of the sector.

Many will consider this article to be a cry for help from a Safe Pass tutor who sees the end in sight and wants to save their own skin. Let me be very clear; I am a Chartered Safety Professional with over 25 years' experience, and I have seen the tremendous good in Safe Pass training

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Declan Gibney is a Chartered Safety Practitioner and a Fellow of the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH).

He is Managing Consultant of Synergy Risk Management Ltd, a health and safety consultancy based in the southeast, and assists a range of clients in their strategic management of health and safety.

Declan is also a former Vice President of IOSH and is currently a member of the IOSH Council, which provides advice and guidance on matters of strategy and policy relating to the objects of the Institution, on issues relevant to members, on the membership of IOSH and on the occupational safety and health profession. Email declan@worksafe.ie.



over the years. I accept that there is a need for reform, but it should stop short of a complete transformation as suggested by some.

We are on the verge of populist opinion forcing through changes that will spell the end of Safe Pass training in its current formant. Moving to an online 'test' will not be in the best interest of the industry and comes at the very time that we need to redouble our efforts to raise standards, raise awareness and save lives.

Before we start to sleepwalk into these changes, let's make sure that all options are carefully considered, and all voices heard.